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THEY DON'T

Barry Forshaw takes a trip down to his local video shop and has a look at the many musicals now available on tape. Is the musical truly dead, or is it merely resting?

T MAKE EM...

Or — even worse — are you the more modern moaner who laments 'Why wasn't Elvis ever allowed to make a good musical? All those match-box cover plots and moronic "best friends"...'

Well, whatever bee is buzzing in your bonnet, the video industry has certainly supplied us with a solid library of high-voltage musical memories from *42nd Street* (Warner) right up to *Absolute Beginners* (the latter due soon from Palace — just thought I'd mention that as the film needs a little publicity.)

If you're like me, and believe that the Astaire/Kelly/Garland holy trinity has had few worthy successors, you'll be best advised to shell out your rental fees on the big four (Warner, Thorn EMI, MGM-UA and CBS/Fox), who've got the musical market pretty well sewn up. Of course, you could wait till your favourites turn up on TV again — but then you'll have to put

How many times have you heard someone moan that they just don't make good musicals anymore? And if you're one of the moaners, do you bore your friends with remarks like 'Just rented the video of *Singin' In The Rain* — that's what dancing's all about, not Travolta being edited to look like a good dancer in *Saturday Night Fever*!'

up with cuts, adverts etc. (*South Pacific's* 'I'm gonna wash that man right out of my hair' was replaced in a showing some years ago with a shampoo ad — appropriate enough, I suppose). And if you're lucky enough to own a stereo video (and if not, why not? Are you still wasting money on things like food and clothing?), you can enjoy in timpanic-membrane shattering sound such things as that dizzying dive into the man-made caverns of New York in *West Side Story* (Warner), or the equally exhilarating helicopter zoom shot of our Julie at the start of *The Sound Of Music* (whatever you



Previously unseen footage from the wonderful wizard of you-know-where



lists, with its lyrical Raye/De Paul score and top-notch playing from Jane Powell and Howard Keel (before *Dallas* did for him as an actor). Keel also shines in MGM's version of *Kiss Me Kate* (originally 3-D, but regrettably flat on video). Slightly flat also, as a version of Cole Porter's sparkling score — perhaps the censoring of his perkier lyrics depressed everyone.

Those who would want an Astaire vehicle as their best-ever rather than Kelly's *Singin' In The Rain*, might opt for *The Band Wagon* — with Fred getting a little long in the tooth, but still the most elegant dancer the cinema's ever seen, admirably showcased here.

Still with MGM, one has to put high on the list the three great Judy Garland musicals, *The Wizard Of Oz*, *Meet Me In St. Louis* and *Easter Parade* (the latter with Astaire coaxed out of retirement to replace an unavailable Gene Kelly). Garland's fragile, volatile talents are triumphantly displayed in these three films, all guaranteed to bring the odd furtive tear to the eye (remember her 'Have yourself a merry little Christmas' in *Meet Me*?), and it's impossible to watch the durable *Wizard Of Oz* now without thinking of the MGM executives who wanted to cut *Over The Rainbow*! (later re-incarnated as the Decca execs who showed the door to the Beatles).

Left: *My Fair, Quality Street?*

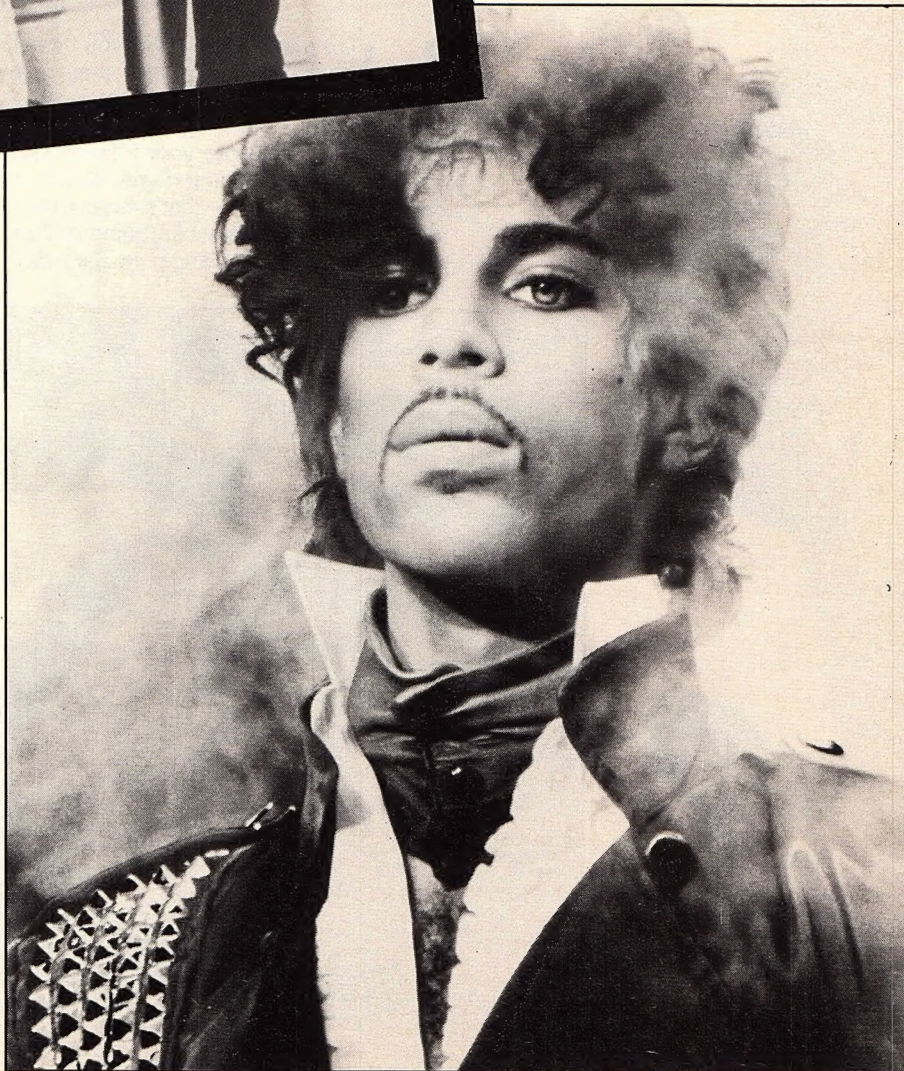
Below: *The man with three eyebrows*

think of the film, it's still one hell of an opening!)

On a head count of classic song 'n' dance movies, it has to be said that MGM-UA win hands (or should it be feet?) down — and this is because they've got most of the musicals produced by the legendary Arthur Freed, who assembled the definitive collection of the finest songwriters, composers, orchestrators and all those who might contribute to a glittering series of musical classics.

Of this series, few would argue that the jewel in MGM's crown was Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's *Singin' In The Rain*. And I'm one of those who'd also plump for this perfectly crafted tale of silent Hollywood as the best musical ever made — because of that throat-catching rendition of the title song by Gene Kelly on a soggy MGM back lot. (and this is surely one of those things about which the Bard might have said 'age cannot wither, etc' — does it matter how often you see those marvelous frames?). The film is primarily a splendid piece of team work (particularly the solid support from Debbie Reynolds and Donald O'Connor — not to mention Jean Hagen's splendidly frog-voiced prima donna)

Seven Brides For Seven Brothers would be high on most people's ten best





Let's see them teeth now boys. RCA/Columbia's 'Oliver'.

If you want to remind yourself what the most accomplished popular singer of all time was like before his figure puffed out and his voice lost its laser-like accuracy, check out Frank Sinatra in MGM's *High Society* and *On The Town*. The former has Cole Porter's scintillating score sung to perfection by Sinatra, a mature Crosby and the irrepressible Louis Armstrong, while the latter has Frank happily cast in the most stunning Donen/kelly vehicle outside *Singin' In The Rain* (Sinatra also appears in the two *That's Entertainment* compilations — often frustratingly incomplete in the abbreviated clips included, but still studded with gems.)

You'll notice, of course, Gene Kelly's vital presence throughout this survey, whose muscular, athletic appeal was more down-to-earth than Astaire's aristocratic top hat and tails image. And in MGM's *An American In Paris*, it's clear that Kelly was a more imaginative creator than Astaire, who, apart from choreographing his classic dances had little ambition for the overall design of his films. In *An American In Paris*, Kelly and Donen created something quite new in constructing a film around both Gershwin songs and his captivating orchestral suite (with the most extended ballet yet seen in musicals.)

Lesser lights in the MGM video firm-

ment are *The Great Caruso* (if you can take Mario Lanza), *Ziegfeld Follies* and *Anchors Aweigh*, but Elvis fans are catered for with *Jailhouse Rock* (one of the man's better films, before Col. Tom laundered his screen image) and *Viva las Vegas* — the usual trifling plot, but a lot of Ann-Margret's sexy energy. Oh yes — MGM also have Pavarotti's musical debut, *Yes, Giorgio* — but let's draw a discreet veil over that one.

The other big guns are to be found firing away at Warner Home Video, starting with one of the earliest classics, Busby Berkeley's *42nd Street*. Those over-the-top Berkeley numbers still dazzle and almost make up for Ruby Keeler — but while MGM concentrates on the classic 40's and 50's musicals, WHV ushers us into the more recent big-budget hits such as *West Side Story*. And this one film alone is a very persuasive reason for buying or renting a stereo video — after you've heard that pulse-pounding overture thundering from both of your Hi-fi speakers, you're unlikely to go back to the 2x2 tinny wheedling of your TV speaker. And while the film loses a lot on the small screen, a great deal of the original power comes across — reminding one that Bernstein's epoch-making score still packs a sizeable punch.

Camelot and *Hair* (also from WHV)

were less successful in the transition to cinema screen, but still offer nuggets of pleasure — and *Hair*, of course, spear-headed the age of the new rock-based musical. And with *A Star Is Born*, Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson created a strange hybrid by replacing the more traditional Harold Arlen songs of the Judy Garland film with newer rock-based material (including Streisand's beautiful Academy Award winning 'Evergreen'). And the marketplace has more evidence of the pop-orientated musical in such efforts as Prince's *Purple Rain* (WHV), CIC's *Footloose* and *Flashdance* and Guild's *Breakdance I and II*.

But before moving on to the newer films (with soundtracks guaranteed to break any lease) we've got to turn to that other cornucopia of good musicals, CBS/FOX. And it's the market in classic Rogers and Hammerstein musicals that they've cornered — starting with what many people consider the best, *The King And I*, the film that kept Yul Brynner in knee breeches and jewelled waistcoat for many years after swapping the film's Deborah Kerr for a succession of Annas. And despite a certain stiffness in Charles Walters' direction (not to mention the seeds of R & H's glutinous use of kids), this really has the most fully fleshed characters of any musical — not to mention those glorious songs ('We Kiss In A Shadow', 'Something Wonderful', etc.)

Of course, *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma!* (also from CBS/FOX) are no slouches either, the latter a real groundbreaker in its late forties stage presentation. Perhaps both movies are worthy rather than inspired records of the stage shows, but they're still essential viewing for the musical buff — as are CBS/FOX's other biggies, *My Fair Lady*, the cult favourite *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Sound Of Music* (all right, you might need a very sweet tooth for that one, with its melodious nuns — but it is in stereo, which you can't yet get on the box!)

From RCA/Columbia, there's a varied trio — *Oliver!*, Lloyd Webber's *Song and Dance* and *Carmen* — which has been called the greatest musical ever written (and it is a succession of knockout tunes!), while Screen Entertainment boasts a selection of Cliff Richard musicals (and he must have fans — look how *Time* is packing 'em in, despite the reviews!).

But we're in 1986, and the old-style musical (at least on film) is terminally ill — what punters seem to want is well represented on the CIC label by *Flashdance* (all pounding sweaty thighs — but there's nothing wrong with that, even if the music's pretty bland rock), *Footloose* (with a plot that makes Elvis' plots look like Dostoyevsky) and the surprisingly sharp *Saturday Night Fever* (definitely preferable to the heavily censored TV print.) And if you're into Travolta, CIC have *Grease I & II*, not to mention *Staying Alive*.

But as for the future — will Palace's issue of *Absolute Beginners* bring back the musical?

VW

FOR FRIENDSHIP, LOVE OR MARRIAGE



Starting Out — Andrew and Jackie

Andrew, a 22 year old computer engineer from Cornwall, found his job, though interesting, did not bring him into contact with women — indeed his life had become fairly monastic. Jackie, by her own admission on the other hand, had boys queuing to take her out. 'But they were either the wrong ones, they already had girlfriends, or they just mucked me around.' When Jackie's parents discovered she was contemplating joining Dateline they were pretty off-putting. 'What do you want to do that for? It's silly!' Undaunted, Jackie joined anyway! After a telephone call to introduce himself, Andrew said he would pick Jackie up from her home the following Sunday. 'Come in' invited Jackie, and proceeded to introduce him to her mother, her father (hiding in the front room behind a newspaper), her sister, her aunt, her two cousins, and the family dog! A thorough vetting! Within six weeks Andrew felt Jackie was a girl he could settle down with, but didn't voice his feelings for fear of frightening her off. He had also managed to conquer his loathing of discos to some extent, knowing that Jackie liked to dance. It was only fair after all — 'She had to put up with my collecting fossils and going out at night with my telescope to look at the stars!' However, they are now engaged. 'I know I'm young,' said Jackie 'but Andrew is the one and I don't want to lose him, and my parents think he's the best thing since sliced bread.' For Andrew, the proof that joining Dateline is the best thing he's ever done, is simply 'Jackie, who is going to be my wife next year.'



New Beginnings — Judith and Bob

Long hours as a driver for a Duke and lack of opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex, meant that Bob, a 37 year old divorcee was pretty fed up with his social life. He decided to join Dateline, as he was pretty certain he wasn't going to have the luck to meet someone special any other way! The very first name on his list was that of Judith, a 35 year old medical secretary from Bury. He wrote to her, little expecting he was to meet someone absolutely right for him on the first attempt. But that was how it turned out! Judith had met about half a dozen men through Dateline before meeting Bob; no one special but 'all pleasant and at least not married, as most of the people I had been meeting before had been.' When she got Bob's letter she thought he sounded so very, very nice she couldn't wait to ring him. They liked each other straight away, and within three or four meetings realised they had something special. 'Basically Bob's kind,' explained Judith. 'We got on so well together, I like his children and get on well with his mother and family.' They plan to marry later this year. As Judith says 'It is wonderful. My life has changed so much.' A new job for Bob, a new home, and new beginnings for a very happy couple.



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Fourteen Years On — Cindy and Tony

Cindy and Tony met through Dateline way back in 1970 and have now celebrated fourteen years of 'computer matched marriage'. Cindy, at the time, was a 28 year old P.A. with a small son. She was fed up with 'getting involved with men I shouldn't'. Tony was a 33 year old electronics engineer who had just ended a close relationship and wanted to get back into the swing of things. When they met through Dateline they found they had so much in common, but although they saw each other for five months, they didn't really get close because of Tony's attachment to his former girlfriend. However, many months after they had separated, Tony wrote to Cindy asking to see her. She thought he 'had a cheek', but agreed to meet him, and within a few weeks they were in love. They married in 1972 and have never hidden that they met through Dateline. 'It may sound unromantic, but it is logical — and it works!' At least you know the people you meet are in the market for a relationship — and that you have things in common.' For Cindy and Tony joining Dateline was the recipe for 'love - the lasting kind.'



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